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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ FEB PANAMA IMMEDIATE  
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SUBJECT: Secretary Rice's Meeting with Colombian Anti-TPA  
Labor Leaders

1. (U) January 24, 2008; 6:15 p.m.; Medellin, Colombia.

2. (SBU) Participants:

United States  
The Secretary  
Ambassador William R. Brownfield  
Representative Melissa Bean  
Representative Eliot Engel  
Representative Jane Harman  
Representative Alcee Hastings  
Representative Ron Klein  
Representative Rick Larsen  
Representative Solomon Ortiz  
Representative Ed Perlmutter  
Representative David Scott  
A/S Jeffrey Bergner, H  
A/S Sean McCormack, PA  
A/S Thomas Shannon, WHA  
A/S Daniel Sullivan, EEB  
S Chief of Staff Brian Gunderson  
Director of House Affairs Scott Kamins  
Deputy Executive Secretary Kevin Whitaker  
Adam Lenert, Embassy Notetaker

COLOMBIA  
Carlos Rodriguez, President of the United Workers'  
Confederation (CUT)  
Boris Montes, Assistant Secretary General, CUT  
William Millan, Deputy Secretary General, General  
Confederation of Workers (CGT)  
Ruben Dario Gomez, Deputy Secretary General, Antioquia  
Division, CGT  
Apecides Alvis, President, Colombian Confederation of  
Workers (CTC)  
Jose Leon Ramirez, Secretary of International Relations,  
CTC  
Jose Luciano Sanin, Director, National Unionist School  
(ENS)

3. (SBU) SUMMARY. Colombian trade union officials that  
oppose the U.S.-Colombian Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA)  
told the Secretary and accompanying Members of Congress  
that a TPA would increase competition from the United  
States and endanger domestic industries. They urged the  
Members not to approve the TPA until Colombia fully  
guaranteed unions' rights and workers had better contracts  
and benefits, adding that no changes to the existing TPA  
would alter their opposition. The Members of Congress  
said they did not want the TPA "held hostage" by the

unions, but they remained concerned about violence and  
impunity. The Secretary noted that the U.S.-Colombia TPA  
had the strongest labor protections of any TPA and said  
the United States would remain committed to ensuring  
Colombia's compliance. END SUMMARY.

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LABOR REPS FEAR U.S. COMPETITION  
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4. (SBU) Colombian labor representatives said they oppose  
the TPA because Colombian industry could not compete with  
U.S. firms without protection. Rodriguez said it remains  
costly and time-consuming to transport goods from Bogota  
and Medellin to seaports for export. He claimed the lack  
of a national railroad, good highways, and industrial  
machinery makes it difficult for Colombian producers to  
compete with U.S. producers. Millan conceded that some  
sectors of Colombia's economy would benefit from a TPA and  
that the agreement would phase-in the removal of trade  
barriers for vulnerable sectors, but predicted its passage  
would increase U.S. imports to Colombia by 320 percent and  
result in the loss of thousands of Colombian jobs.

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CONFEDERATIONS CRITICIZE GOC ON SAFE-GUARDS, COMPLIANCE  
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5. (SBU) Millan said the U.S. Congress should not approve  
a TPA until Colombia fully guaranteed unions' rights and  
workers had better benefits. He said the Colombian  
government had not done enough to protect unionists from  
violence, prosecute perpetrators of crimes against them,  
and strengthen the ability of workers to bargain  
collectively. Sanin complained that labor reforms in  
1990, 1992, and 2002 made employment contracts more  
flexible, resulting in more fixed-term contracts and  
making it easier for employees to fire workers. He  
complained these reforms also created a loophole that  
allowed employers to avoid paying social security and

other benefits by contracting with cooperatives instead of directly hiring workers.

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VIOLENCE, IMPUNITY REMAIN CONCERNS  
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16. (SBU) Sanin acknowledged that violence against unionists had fallen sharply, but claimed Colombia remained the most violent country in the world for

organized labor. He rejected the Colombian government's findings that the motives in most union murders did not relate to the victim's union activity, but more often resulted from common crime, personal conflicts, or violence between illegal armed groups. Sanin added that the USD 37 million the Colombian government spent on protecting unionists and other vulnerable individuals in 2007 confirmed that they remained at risk in Colombia.

17. (SBU) Sanin said he hoped the United States would pressure the Colombian government to take action on four main proposals: 1) reform labor legislation to conform to International Labor Organization standards concerning the rights of workers to organize and to strike; 2) implement a decent minimum wage; 3) promote social dialogue to create strong, legitimate unions; and 4) reinstate the Labor Ministry and ensure its capacity to enforce labor standards.

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UNIONS DECLARE OPPOSITION TO TPA INALTERABLE  
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18. (SBU) Rodriguez said no changes to the TPA or additional assurances from the United States could alter the confederations' opposition. He demanded the complete redrafting of the TPA with extensive input from the unions. Representative Engel commented that the confederations wanted to "hold the TPA hostage" to force the Colombian government to comply with their terms.

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U.S. COMMITTED TO ENSURING COMPLIANCE  
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19. (SBU) Secretary Rice thanked the unionists for their openness. She believed the TPA would promote economic growth while providing an opportunity for social justice in a country emerging from a period of extraordinary civil conflict. She said she shared concerns about ensuring compliance with labor standards and the rights of workers, and agreed that a free labor movement did constitute an important part of democracy. The Secretary told the unionists that the U.S.-Colombia TPA had the strongest labor protections of any TPA the U.S. had signed. She added that re-negotiation of the agreement would not be possible, but said the United States has committed to ensuring that its free-trade partners upheld those provisions and international conventions.  
RICE